

Communism in South Africa

By DAVID IVON JONES

(Presented to the Executive of the Third International on behalf of the International Socialist League, South Africa).

(Continued from last issue).

Rural Movements

THERE is no white labour movement of any kind in the country districts of South Africa, excepting, of course, the attempts at organization in the townships wherever cheap white, coloured and native labour are engaged in local industries. The natives do nearly all the farm labouring. The sons of the Boer farmers, no matter how impecunious they may be, are generally too race-proud to labour on the land. In any case the cheap native labour tends to drive all but white proprietors to the towns. The laws of inheritance are measures of disinheritance. The farms are divided up amongst the children, calling for more intensive culture, to which the Dutch farmers have not been trained, the old system of pasturage enabled the farmer to sit on his stoep and smoke his pipe. Thus the farms fall to those who bring progressive methods of agriculture to bear on the land. There is a considerable class of landless Dutch Afrikanders. They eke out a living on the "bywoning" system, by which they are allowed to occupy a hut and pasture and cultivate a small corner of a farm in return for services to the farmer when called upon: a kind of servitude. But this system is falling into disfavour with the rich farmers. They prefer the "squatting" system, a species of sub-letting to natives on half shares. There is, therefore, a constant stream of landless Dutch to the towns. Large numbers are employed in gangs, called "poor white" gangs, on pay so miserable that they are in a constant state of semi-starvation. These cast-offs from the rural districts, spurned socially and economically by the very class of nationalist farmer whom they follow politically, help to make up the slums of Johannesburg. Vrededorp, the Johannesburg slum district, is a social cesspool where the Dutch, English, Indian, Coloured man, Kaffir and Hottentot all at last find equality in wretchedness, "equally of no account to the capitalist class." It would be hard to find a parallel for Vrededorp in any town in Europe. The rigorous anti-liquor laws, which make it a penal offence to give alcohol to natives in the Transvaal, find their victims in this class. Three-fourths of the white inmates of South African prisons are convicted of selling drink to natives; that last tempting resort of the destitute and miserable.

As a result of the migration to the towns, the urban workers are becoming increasingly Dutch. Before the war the Executive of the Mine Workers' Union was wholly of British descent. Now more than half are Dutch Afrikanders. The tramway systems and semi-skilled services are now largely run by Dutch workers, who soon develop into good trades unionists and loyal agitators for their class, always, of course, within the limits of their colour.

At a local strike on the Simmer Deep mine last year, when both British and Dutch miners stopped work as a protest against the dismissal of a German member of the Union, both sections tacitly dropped their respective nationalisms for the time being; and it was good to see the young Dutch workers, who a week before and perhaps the week after, sported their nationalist green and yellow, on this occasion proudly wearing their bits of Red as the only suitable emblem for such an occasion as a strike. The industrial system is also weaning gradually the Dutch workers from the most violent forms of colour prejudice. The traffic of Dutch workers to and fro is linking up town and country as never before; and the expropriated Dutch of the country districts will soon share in the inevitable change of outlook.

The South African Native

Speaking generally, the South African natives are a race of labourers. The bulk of the race is now found interspersed in white areas. Certain territories are still reserved for their tribal homes, such as Zululand, Basutoland, Swaziland and Bechuanaland. In these areas a sort of primitive communism exists as far as the land is concerned. What little government of local matters is required in a society where there is very little property is exercised by the chiefs, petty chiefs, and Headmen, always, of course, under the supervision of the police patrol. The perpetual sunshine renders maize the only prime necessity. Zululand, for example, is a land of free and rolling "savannah" with no property boundaries; dotted with the round straw huts of the Zulus, which are without windows or outlet for smoke, and with only a low hole in the structure to creep in and out. Round the huts are the small patches of maize chiefly dug by hand, or of idombis, a kind of Zulu potato. The natives in their tribal state live very closely to the soil, they and their habitations seem part of it, elemental in their simplicity of life. In Basutoland they are more affluent, owning horses and cattle; and of late an increase in cattle is to be observed in Zululand also, enabling their owners to plough at home instead of going to labour for the whites. In the Transkei, Cape Colony, a system of native small proprietorship was tried, known as the Glen-Grey settlements. But this is an exception to the general scheme of things. A recent clamour from white settlers that Zululand should be opened up for settlement for white farmers was answered by Minister Malan that this was out of the question, as it would increase the cost of native labour for the whole country. This, then, is the function of the native territories, to serve as cheap breeding grounds for black labour—the repositories of the reserve army of native labour—sucking it in or letting it out according to the demands of industry. By means of these territories Capital is relieved of the obligation of paying wages to cover the cost to the labourer of reproducing his kind.

Between the territories and the industrial centres there is a constant traffic to and fro of natives. What draws the native away from his home? The marriage customs are a cause. Wives are worth so many cows, and money must be got to buy them,

But the chief impulse is the hut tax specially levied for the purpose; besides which large numbers are allured to the towns by social instinct and the excitement of town life among so many of their own folk there, so that the first excursion from home in many cases becomes a permanent absence. For the native there is the prospect of learning to read and write; he has a keen desire for education. There is the native church in the towns, either as an adjunct of the white religious bodies or his own Ethiopian church, an institution frowned upon by the white Christians for its lack of respectable guidance in the interpretation of the gospels! There is the allurements of machinery. The native is captivated by a piece of machinery, and will seek out its inmost pulsations and tend it as a god. In the towns also there is freedom from the social interference of the chiefs, even if obtained at the cost of subservience to white society. For native women there is emancipation from the tribal marriage customs; tens of thousands of native women are detribalized by contracting free liaisons in the towns not sanctioned by tribal custom. The chiefs are benignant enough old institutions. But they bewail their disappearing authority, although they are useful to the capitalist for the recruiting of labour. In a prosecution in which we were involved for a Bolshevik leaflet addressed to natives as well as whites, the Crown Prosecutor continually referred to those town natives who no longer own allegiance to the chief as "the hooligan class of native," that is, they are no longer under official control. They have taken the step from tribesman to proletarian.

Outcast and outlawed the native may be, but no "hooligan." In the Transvaal and the Free State Province the native has no vote, no civil and political rights. A breach of labour contract is a penal offence. The natives on the mines work on a system of indenture, generally of one year's duration. They do not live in private dwellings, but are herded into "compounds" adjacent to the mines. Indeed, native housing in the towns is not fit for cattle. Most of the hundreds of thousands of natives who work in the towns are housed in backyards, tin shacks, stable lofts, the best way they can. Their level of existence is inconceivably low. Every native male must carry a passport: one to leave his tribe, another to seek work, a monthly pass while working, another pass when he wants to be out after nine o'clock curfew. A policeman may at all times stop a native and demand his pass. Hence most natives have been to jail at one time or another. This is a mere trifle to him with all the regulations that hem round his daily life. He is paid two or three shillings a day, with or without his ration of mealie meal, as the case may be. A rise of a shilling a day would create a panic on the gold market.

Yet in spite of it all, the Bantu is a happy proletarian. He has lovable qualities. "His joy of life and fortitude under suffering," to quote Lefargue's words on the negro; his communal spirit, his physical vitality, his keen desire to know, despite his intellectual backwardness, make him an object of lurking affection to the whites who come in contact with him.

Moreover, he is no fool. He has a certain naïve wisdom which goes to the root of things. It was the questionings of the Zulus

that led the celebrated Bishop Colenso to change his religious views. Arrested development of the native mind has been a theory very much resorted to by negrophobes. To the exploiters, the less a man has the more must be taken from him. Some bourgeois negrophiles, like Loram the Natal educationalist, have even gone to the pains of disproving this meaningless theory. To us it suffices that the native workers are the producers and are robbed of the products of their labour. The truth is that a radical difference in psychology exists. The native bends to capital, but capital also bends to his primeval instincts. See a gang of natives working on the roads or railways! On every possible pretext they will work in unison, raising and lowering the pick, with rhythmic flourishes thrown in, to the tune of their Zulu chants. Ever and anon the tune or the time changes, in an endless variety from the ancestral repertoire, in perfect harmony and rhythm—impromptu choruses of the wild, charming even the dullest. No gaffer can speed up such a gang. And when the same gang tries to sing a simple Christian hymn it makes a most discordant mess of it. Such is arrested development!

The Native Labour Movement

A formal statement of the various categories of native labour and the true Communist policy towards the native workers has been prepared by Comrade S. P. Bunting and accepted by the International Socialist League.

Before the war no trade union movement existed among the native workers, and such a thing as a strike was unknown. The first move in the direction of organised revolt was a strike of native workers on the dumping machinery of the Van Ryn Gold Mine in December, 1915. It was regarded as a novel affair by the white workers of the mine: but it appears that certain white men who engaged to keep the plant going were sneered at as blacklegs by their white fellow-workers. Prior to that, in the 1913 revolt of the white workers, appeals had been made to the native workers of the Kleinfontein mine to stop working, and it seems to have dawned then on the white workers' intelligence, or some of their most militant leaders like George Mason, that the native was really a kind of a workmate. In 1917, Comrade Bunting and other members of the I.S.L. made an attempt to form a native workers' union. A number of the more industrialized natives of Johannesburg were enrolled into the Union, which was named the "Industrial Workers of Africa" (an echo of the "Industrial Workers of the World"). It held meetings regularly, and the message of working class emancipation was eagerly imbibed for the first time by an ardent little band of native workers who carried the message far and wide to their more backward brethren. A manifesto to the workers of Africa was issued in collaboration with the I.S.L. written in the Zulu and Basuto languages, calling upon the natives to unite against their capitalist oppressors. This leaflet reached a still wider mass of native workers, and was introduced and read to the illiterate labourers in the mine compounds. For the native of Africa, and the white too, for that matter, the question is not yet "irrevocably put of bloody struggle or death." It is the era of

awakening to the consciousness of class. The emphasis of the League on the new power of industrial solidarity, which their very oppressors had put in their hands, had as its aim to draw away the native's hopes from the old tribal exploits with the spear and the assegai as a means of deliverance. The power of the machine dawned upon him. In 1918 the propaganda of the I.W.A., and the pressure of the rising cost of living, produced a formidable strike movement among the native municipal workers, and a general movement for the tearing up of passports. Hundreds of natives who had burned their passes were jailed every day, and the prisons became full to bursting. Gatherings of native men and women were clubbed down by the mounted police. The International Socialist League was charged with inciting to native revolt. Comrades Bunting, Tinker and Hanscombe were arrested at the instance of the Botha Government; but the chief native witness for the Crown broke down. He admitted that the evidence of incitement to riot had been invented for him by the Native Affairs Department, and the case collapsed. The moving spirits of the I.W.A. were driven out of Johannesburg by the police, some to find their way to Capetown, where a more permanent movement of native organization has since been formed. It has also spread to Bloemfontein, where Msimang, a young native lawyer, is active in native organization. In the Cape Province the natives are more advanced politically, and more permanently settled in the European areas. But the greater civil equality does not bring greater freedom to combine. Masabalala, the leader of the Port Elizabeth native workers, was imprisoned last August for his trade union activity. Trade unionism among the native workers makes the hair of the South African bourgeois stand on end. But the result of Masabalala's imprisonment was that his comrades rose *en masse* and tried to storm the prison. A massacre by the armed police ensued: and the "white agitators of the Rand" blamed as usual.

But the most portentous event so far in the awakening of the native workers was the great strike of native mine workers on the Rand in March, 1920. These mine natives are mostly raw recruits from the tribal territories, from Zululand, Basutoland, far-away Blantyre and Portuguese Africa, all are here. For the time being all the old tribal feuds were forgotten, and Zulu and Shangaan came out on strike together irrespective of tribal distinction, to the number of 80,000. Without leaders, without organization, hemmed in their compounds by the armed police, the flame of revolt died down, not without one or two bloody incidents in which the armed thugs of the law distinguished themselves for their savagery. The I.S.L. at the time was engaged in the general elections, printing literature on the Soviets and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat for its five candidates. The white workers were undecided as to their attitude towards the native strikers. The I.S.L. came out with an appeal in *The International* and in thousands of leaflets entitled "Don't Scab," calling upon the white workers to play the game towards the native strikers. These were distributed in the mine shafts by Communist sympathisers among the miners. One or two were made the object of a prosecution by the police, but released later owing to the difficulty felt, no doubt, of getting at the I.S.L. for propaganda

in the heat of an election. The Capitalist Press, thinking to damage our election prospects, gave still further publicity to our appeal by reproducing it in full as a proof of our criminality! The Mineworkers' Union Executive called upon its members to side with the masters and endeavour to run the mines, and publicly condemned our propaganda. But such is the division of labour in South Africa that whereas either black labour or white labour can stop industry, neither can properly start the wheels going again without the other.

Native Political Leaders

There exists a body known as The Native Congress, with sections functioning in the various Provinces and for the whole Union. This is a loosely organized body composed of the chiefs, native lawyers, native clergymen, and others who eke out a living as agents among their compatriots. This body is patronized and lectured by the Government. It has weekly newspapers in the various provinces: *Abantu Batho* in Johannesburg, *Ilangu Lasa Natal* in Natal, etc. These are subsidized by Government advertisements, which are often withdrawn when the Congress drops the rôle of respectable bourgeois which it normally tries to assume. It is satisfied with agitation for civil equality and political rights to which its members as a small coterie of educated natives feel they have a special claim. But to obtain these the mass cannot be moved without their moving in a revolutionary manner. Hence the Government is dubious about the Congress, and the Congress draws back timidly from the mass movements of its own people. The native workers of the I.W.A. quickly grasped the difference between their trade union and the Congress, and waged a merciless war of invective at the joint meetings of their Union with the Congress against the black-coated respectables of the Congress. But the growing class organizations of the natives will soon dominate or displace the "Congress." The national and class interests of the natives cannot be distinguished the one from the other. Here is a revolutionary nationalist movement in the fullest meaning of Lenin's term.

Native Education, etc.

Apart from work done by Christian missions, the natives are thrown largely on their own resources for their education. Reading and writing are not necessary to their industrial function, so they have to acquire these at their own night schools, those who have the ambition. Here is a grand field for Communist activity given the necessary personnel and the money. In the Cape and Natal there are voices heard in favour of education for the natives. Far-seeing bourgeoisie like Sir William Beaumont in Natal are advocates of votes for the native, with education, in order, as he says, that the native may be taught to vote as a good citizen, that is, as a good bourgeois. The mining industry has been wobbling in its attitude towards the educational and civil advancement of the natives, being hindered by political organizations, and the Frankenstein of race prejudice which it has itself conjured up,

from reducing working costs by opening the higher industrial employments to natives and coloured men. In the last few years *The Star*, the Chamber of Mines daily, has incessantly declared in favour of the civil advancement of the natives, vigorously attacking the white unions for their denial of equality of opportunity to the native worker. These appeals, made in the interest of lower working costs, are nevertheless unanswerable in logic from the Labour point of view. The native does not care what the motive may be. He sees in his economic exploiters the champions of his civil rights. Now that the capitalist parties are safely seated in the Government saddle we may look forward to steps being taken to realize the programme. After the native strikes of 1920 the Chamber of Mines issued a newspaper for distribution gratis, printed in the native languages. Its leading articles were chiefly devoted to discrediting the Socialists and white agitators generally. The I.S.L. had under consideration the issuing of a Communist sheet in counterblast, but found itself unable to do this in addition to *The International*. This attempt to debauch the mind of the native workers while it is in the process of awakening is one which the Communist movement is too weak to frustrate; and we can only call the attention of the Third International to the fact.

The I.S.L. and its Task

The International Socialist League, soon after it parted company with the Labour Party, declared for the solidarity of Labour irrespective of race, colour or creed. Imbued with the ideas of De Leon, as popularized in the splendid series of Marxian pamphlets issued by the S.L.P. of America and Great Britain, the League proclaimed the principal of Industrial Unionism, placing in the Parliamentary fight the fight to end parliaments, and to replace them by the class state of the workers functioning through their industrial unions. Therefore craft unions were declared odious as dividing the workers instead of uniting them on the larger basis of industry. And as part of this craft disunity the exclusion of the native workers from part or lot in the Labour Movement was denounced as a crime. To us, the rather mechanical formula of De Leon's Industrial Unionism (which was deemed capable of performing a bloodless revolution by "a lock-out of the capitalist class") was made a living thing by its application to the native workers. Later on the word became flesh in the Soviets, and we no longer worry overmuch about the craft or professional form which the older unions have taken.

The League having thus been captured by the De Leonites, the reform pacifists gave us the cold shoulder, and several slunk back into the Labour Party. The League also formed branches which have had fluctuating success in the Reef towns of Krugersdorp, Benoni, Springs and Germiston, also at Durban and Kimberley. Durban has also had for years a small group calling itself the Social Democratic Party, followers of Hyndman in war and peace. This body refused to link up with the I.S.L. on the excuse that we were only the Labour Party under another name. It was allowed to hold its meetings during the war by an arrangement with the

police that it would leave the war out of its propaganda. At this time the I.S.L. was being mobbed by the organized hooligans of the police and prosecuted for its class war propaganda. This S.D.P. outfit still follows Hyndman in sneering at the Third International and the Russian Revolution, and may justly be put down as of no account. The Social Democratic Federation of Capetown was also unwilling to link up for other reasons. It was composed of pro-warites and anti-warites, and the Jingoese and Pacifists remained in peace together. The I.S.L. was reformist because it fought elections, and the "men from the north," as they called us, were accused of trying to sow disunity in the Federation by its neophyte enthusiasm for Karl Marx as the only authority! Comrade Harrison, one of the members of the S.D.F., carried on a valiant open-air propaganda on anti-militarism and what he calls "philosophical anarchy," for which he was repeatedly prosecuted. Latterly a body of young class war enthusiasts broke away from the S.D.F. and formed the Industrial Socialist League. Anti-political, they thought to emphasize the fact by the word "Industrial." It has now proclaimed itself the Communist Party of Africa. The I.S.L. itself also suffered a breakaway of anti-political anarchists for its persistency in fighting elections. This group also formed itself into a "Communist Party" in unison with the Capetown group. The I.S.L. has made attempts since the proclamation of the Moscow theses to unite these groups into the Third International. The reply of the Johannesburg group objected to the twenty-one conditions and "to the dictatorship of Moscow" (meaning the dictatorship of the Marxian principles). Comrade E. J. Brown, a member of the I.S.L. recently expelled from the Belgian Congo for trade union agitation there, has been more successful in Capetown in the matter of unifying the sound revolutionary elements, and forming a group anxious to fight under the banner of the Third International. The I.S.L. waits on these elements to fall into line before definitely transferring itself into the South African Communist Party of the Third International.

The number of Leagues and Parties all claiming to be revolutionary must not be taken as indicating a large revolutionary following. The I.S.L.'s election results have been very meagre indeed. The best poll was that of Comrade Andrews in Benoni in 1917 with 335 votes against 1,200 odd for the successful candidate. Since then the election results in Benoni have dwindled considerably. The mass of voteless native workers makes it impossible for us to win elections in South Africa. The necessity for propaganda, the need to keep the two streams of the proletariat theoretically one, the need to appeal on the political plane on class issues affecting the native, and above all the advisability of opening as far as possible the arena of civil right for the native struggle makes it imperative nevertheless that we fight elections. The League is by far the largest of the groups that I have mentioned, undoubtedly larger than all the rest combined, and the only one of any political significance. Any worker who puts up a fight for class solidarity in the Transvaal Unions is thereby deemed a supporter of the I.S.L. It has a large circle of passive sympathisers, as evidenced by the number that follow its banner in the May Day

procession, in which the trade unions co-operate. Nevertheless the League's membership has never exceeded four hundred at any time. And latterly the number of militants who have emigrated to Europe has weakened our organization. It is denied the support and inspiration of the great mass of the propertiless proletariat on which the European parties are able to draw. The revolutionary movement depends almost entirely on a few advanced spirits drawn from the thin upper crust of Labour aristocracy. Owing to the heavy social disabilities and political backwardness the natives are not able to supply any active militants to the Communist movement. The immediate needs of white trades unionism, in which a number of our members are actively engaged, tends to throw the more difficult task of native emancipation into the background. The white movement dominates our attention, because the native workers' movement moves only spasmodically, and is neglected. It requires a special department, with native linguists and newspapers. All of which require large funds, which are not available. The Jewish community, with its anti-war and pro-Russian sympathies, has given generous support to our funds. But as the revolution clarifies, this support is now confined to the Jewish revolutionaries proper.

It will thus be seen that the I.S.L. has a particularly heavy task falling upon the shoulders of a few militants who have stuck doggedly to it for over five years. The present writer, having also left Africa for the time being, feels it his duty to appeal for some reinforcement to the South African movement, and to urge that it should come more directly under the purview of the Third International. A few missionaries, revolutionists who need a spell of sunshine, would be very welcome. Primitive though they be, the African natives are ripe for the message of the Communist International. Speed the day when they too will march with "the iron battalions of the proletariat."

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